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ABSTRACT

Much has been written about evaluating student writing in the composition classroom, but there is still a tendency, in the creative writing classroom, to enact unanswered assumptions about what makes a story or a poem "good." If experimental or postmodern fictional writing is not inherently apolitical, neither is it inherently political, subversive, transformative--in other words "good" writing. It should be given the scrutiny that will reveal the profound cultural, epistemological, maybe even ontological challenge that, according to E. Garber, is present within "good" works of this kind. And it should not be automatically privileged over more representational writing--what some call realistic or traditional writing--simply on the basis of its form. It must be acknowledged that experimental works do not necessarily offer a more serious challenge to the status quo, a greater transformative power, than do representational works that, in Garber's words, "don't represent correctly." It is possible to use traditional or representational forms to new ends. What are the "texts that women are actually reading and writing?" Sindiwe Magona writes from her own experience in South Africa. But in the wake of poststructuralism, words like "experience," of course, become problematic--as the individual's "experience" or position as a "subject" becomes solely a product of language. Rita Felski argues that feminist theorists must "develop an analysis of the subject that is able to account for the emancipatory potential of the women's movement as a politics that has been strongly grounded in the dynamics of everyday life." (Contains 12 references.) (TB)

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Stepping onto the Tightrope:
Feminism, Critical Pedagogy, and the Idea of Transformative Texts

This essay addresses the question, particularly pressing for our profession, of what makes writing "good." It's probably an unanswerable question, ultimately; and I think that's actually a good thing. As Kurt Spellmeyer has written in his essay "Foucault and the Freshman Writer," "Because discourse is fundamentally transgressive, the more we attempt to simplify and regulate language by reducing it to an 'academic' univocality, the less occasion students have to make eventful use of their own language and experience" (722).

This does not mean, however, that we should not pose the question of what makes writing 'good' *repeatedly*. As Lester Faigley writes in an essay published around the same time as Spellmeyer's and addressing similar concerns, " . . . if we should not expect to locate a well-articulated set of assumptions such as Ruskin's and Arnold's statements on expressive realism [in other words the assumptions we've inherited from literary studies], neither should we pretend that current assumptions cannot be identified" (403).

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Today, in this student-centered field at this refreshingly post-canonical time, my backgrounds in critical pedagogy and feminist theory prompt me to seek out texts that are *subversive*, that question assumptions, that attempt disruptions--of

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expectations, of the status quo. Texts that are, in the language of Foucault via Spellmeyer, *transgressive*--that position themselves outside both responsibility-free Inclination and rule-clad Institution.

By "texts" I mean all kinds of things--what I read, what I write, what my students read and what they write. While I think that the points I raise in this essay apply to all kinds of student writing, I'd like to stress, particularly, the work that is done in creative writing classrooms and workshops. Because while much has been thought, written, and said about evaluating student writing in the composition classroom, I think there is still a tendency, in the creative writing classroom, to carry, and to enact, unquestioned assumptions about what makes a story or a poem "good." Specifically, I'd like to address, in theoretical terms, a battle that is often waged between two groups of fiction writers and critics: those who favor experimental writing, and those who favor more realistic or representational writing.

I should mention that this essay has its origins in a paper I wrote during my first year in the doctoral program in English at SUNY-Albany. At that point I was in the process of positioning myself as both a fiction writer and a person with backgrounds in composition studies and feminist theory. And as you can imagine, I was discovering some interesting tensions. One such tension revolved around what I perceived at the time as a pronounced bias, within the creative writing element of the program at SUNY,

toward experimental writing.

A few years later I find that I am more receptive to experimental writing, more inclined to question the efficacy--or the potential subversiveness--of more traditional or representational writing. Nonetheless, I feel that that original paper raises questions that I continue to find important. I'm still leary of much so-called experimental writing--of its ahistorical and apolitical tendencies, and of the danger of a whole new set of rules and expectations arising from those who are only interested in playful, parodic, postmodern work.

In short, what I want to pursue, now, in my own and in students' reading and writing, is an awareness of *both* language and context. As unfathomable as it may seem, what I am envisioning, in theoretical terms, is a kind of Fredric Jameson meets Hélène Cixous--with *both*, perhaps, being forced to pause, to sit quietly and listen. To Toni Morrison.

* * *

> "Postmodernism looked radical, but it wasn't. As a movement it was profoundly liberal and became a victim of itself."
>
> --Photographer Carrie Mae Weems

What makes writing "subversive"? I'd like to respond to this question by first discussing what I consider *limits* in the so-called subversiveness of parodic, postmodern literary texts that have often been labeled "subversive." I will conclude, then, with

a discussion of the kind of text that I would consider not only subversive, but *transformative*.

Let me note here that I will be using terms like "postmodern" and "experimental" essentially interchangeably--in reference to works characterized by parody, pastiche, the self-conscious use of language, and so on. I recognize that this is a considerable oversimplification, but I think it's necessary for the argument I wish to make here. Similarly, let me note that while postmodernism cannot be *equated* with poststructuralism, it is generally understood that the textual strategies associated with postmodern writing arise from the insights of poststructuralist theory.

In *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon addresses what she calls the "double encoding of both complicity and critique" of postmodern parody (153). In a chapter titled "Postmodernism and Feminisms," Hutcheon argues that "the postmodern may offer art as the site of political struggle by its posing of multiple and deconstructing questions, but it does not seem able to make the move into political agency" (157). She goes on to contend (quoting the opening of Chris Weedon's *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*) that "'Feminism is a politics.'" But

> Postmodernism is not; it is certainly political, but it is politically ambivalent, doubly encoded as both complicity and critique, so that it can be (and has been) recuperated by both the left and the right, each

ignoring half of that double coding. (168).

And indeed a number of feminist critics have begun to discuss the possible limitations of, for example, the polysemic, indeterminate texts inspired by French feminist theory (the "feminine writing" of Hélène Cixous, for example) on similar grounds. Toril Moi--who traces two strands of feminist criticism, the Anglo-American and the French, in her book *Sexual/Textual Politics*--writes that "Marxist-feminist criticism offers an alternative both to the homogenizing author-centered readings of the Anglo-American critics and to the often ahistorical and idealist categories of the French feminist theorists" (95).

In this remark Moi highlights what I have come to perceive as a danger in the privileging of so-called postmodern or experimental texts; such a privileging, I think, can hide a familiar and dangerous impulse--to maintain that literature is somehow "above" or "outside" politics, or to argue that certain literature is *automatically*, solely on the basis of its form, politically viable or important (what I am calling "subversive"). Furthermore, setting up experimental, indeterminate texts as the only "truly" feminist texts veers dangerously close to a form of reductive essentializing.

Rita Felski argues for a feminist response to texts that originate from what she terms a "socially based position." Such a position "offers the possibility of a more differentiated reading of women's writing--whether realist or avant-garde--grounded in a critical assessment of the ideological interests it articulates

and the cultural needs it seeks to fulfill" (50). Here, then, is a theoretical grounding for the feminist critical pedagogy I want to develop. But what might the "good writing"--the subversive, or perhaps more aptly the "tranformative" text--that I am seeking look like?

Here is a story of a recent "textual encounter." During the fall of 1992, I was one of the fiction readers for *The Little Magazine*, a literary magazine produced by graduate students in English at SUNY-Albany. One story submitted to, and eventually accepted by, the magazine was by South African writer Sindiwe Magona. The story, titled "Sans Bootstraps," is actually the opening chapter of a novel by the same title, and it has since been published, under the title "Leaving," in a collection of stories titled *Living, Loving, and Lying Awake at Night*.

The story is about a black South African woman whose husband has, from all appearances, abandoned his family; this woman makes the painful decision to leave her children and travel to Johannesburg, where she will seek work as a domestic laborer in order to send money home (to the children's grandmother) to feed her family. She convinces herself that this is the proper thing for her to do, as a mother; the story concludes, near the end of the woman's long walk to the train station, with the powerful scene of her pumping her full and painful breasts (which had been dry when she rose and needed to feed her baby), spraying the milk onto the dry ground.

The reactions of members of the magazine's editorial

collective to Magona's story were mixed, but certainly not overwhelmingly positive. What astonished me, however, was the seeming lack of interest in the political realities that informed the story (or if not a lack of interest, then an unwillingness to address such realities). Some readers--specifically those whose preferences were always for stories that displayed a more indeterminate, experimental style--reacted negatively to the traditional, rather Anglicized prose. One reader, who generally expressed a pronounced preference for more nontraditional, nonrepresentational writing, lapsed immediately into the terms of realism in response to the story, objecting to the fact that it ends with a mother leaving her children. Such a response essentially ignores, of course, the questions the story raises about notions of motherhood within the particular political realities it describes. (In the end, what made the story acceptable to this reader was the fact that it is, in fact, the opening chapter of a novel--that the story does go on, beyond the point of the mother's painful departure.)

Readers of this story were reacting, I think, to the ways in which it "doesn't fit." In a climate in which experimental writing is privileged, "Leaving" is, in a sense, anathema--a *seemingly* conventional narrative written in traditional, even rather florid, prose. On the other hand, however, how can a "traditional narrative" simply end with a mother leaving her children, with the futile gesture of her emptying her breasts onto the barren ground?

In Eugene Garber and Jan Ramjerdi's "Reflections on the Teaching of Creative Writing," Garber presents the following "oversimplified summary" (his label) of the three types of discussions that arise in response to three kinds of works that typically show up in fiction workshops:

> In the workshop, discussions of culinary writings [a term Garber borrows from Jauss, and defines as "standard fare made according to the best traditional recipes" (1.11)] are nice and easy and enervated. Discussions of far-out works are engaged and lively, but finally not serious because they don't really get to the profound cultural, epistemological, maybe even ontological challenge that the works represent, if they're any good. Discussions of works that appear to be representational but don't represent correctly (i.e. re-represent the master narratives) will be the most energetic because people will see that the counters and structures of master narratives are really being challenged. (1.12)

Garber's remarks about "far-out works" brings to mind an important point. I am *not* arguing that experimental, nontraditional works are somehow *inherently* apolitical and should, therefore, be excluded from my feminist critical pedagogy-informed classroom. Nor am I arguing for a naive return to purely representational texts, a kind of updated, late twentieth-century social realism. And I do see this, frankly, as

a real limitation in some Anglo-American feminist criticism of the last twenty years, with its insistent privileging of realism, even in the face of the many pressing questions raised by poststructuralist theory.

As Madeleine Grumet writes in *Bitter Milk: Women and Teaching*, "it is our responsibility as educators not to be caught in an understanding of symbol systems that reduces them to elegies for lost worlds" (132). And indeed, it is this kind nostalgic, backward-looking fear of experimental art that feeds the reactionary virulence of an article by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, titled "The Relentless Cult of Novelty: And How It Wrecked the Century," in the *New York Times Book Review* two years ago--an article in which Solzhenitsyn bemoans what he calls "belligerent avant-gardism [that] aimed to tear down the entire centuries-long cultural tradition, to break and disrupt the natural flow of artistic development by a sudden leap forward."

But if experimental writing is not inherently apolitical, neither is it inherently, or automatically, political, subversive, transformative--"good writing," as I am attempting to at least begin to define it. It *should* be given the serious scrutiny that will reveal the "profound cultural, epistemological, maybe even ontological challenge" that, according to Garber, is present within "good" works of this kind. And it should *not*, I think, be automatically privileged over more representational writing, simply on the basis of its form.

I am not convinced, in other words, that experimental forms

offer a more serious challenge to the status quo, a greater "transformative" power, than do representational works that, in Garber's words, "don't represent correctly." In other words, I think it is possible to use traditional or representational forms to new ends (to write a story, for instance, that simply *ends* with a poor, oppressed woman who must leave her children behind). Specifically, I think it is possible to use these forms to important *feminist* ends. Jan Ramjerdi, for example, takes Gene Garber's remarks about representational works "that don't represent correctly" further, arguing that "the master narrative is alive, can live because it is subject to alteration from the outside, the non-master, asserting her right to a form that has never been used to tell her story . . ." (1.13).

What are the "texts that women are actually reading and writing"? What is "her story"? Sindiwe Magona writes from her own experience, and the experience of women she knew, in South Africa. But in the wake of poststructuralism, words like "experience," of course, become problematic--as our "experience," our positions as "subjects," become solely products of language. "Experience," then, dissolves into a kind of filmy net--bringing to mind the potential down side of some poststructuralist theory. Taken in certain directions such theory can, in the words of Robert Scholes, "inhibit any attempt to criticize either a text or the world" (110). And this brings me to what I consider a fundamental and too seldom acknowledged aspect of much poststructuralist theory as well as much of the experimental

writing that has emerged from it: these are the works and the theories, I would argue, of a privileged, dominant class (often white, often upper class)--a social elite whose members have nothing to lose if their "experience," their positions as "subjects," are seen as mere linguistic tropes.

In an essay titled "'Too Little Care': Language, Politics, and Embodiment in the Life-World," Kurt Spellmeyer asks why what he calls "the reality of experience" has been, at best, neglected by scholars and theorists. Such neglect, he concludes, "is an outcome of our privileged situation as the 'winners' of colonial history, who like winners everywhere justify the status quo by appealing to the notion that things are the way they are necessarily" (270). (This is also, I think, what photographer Carrie Mae Weems means when she describes postmodernism as "profoundly liberal.")

The "socially based position" described by Rita Felski, on the other hand, does not neglect the social and economic realities of "experience." Felski argues that feminist theorists must "develop an analysis of the subject which is able to account for the emancipatory potential of the women's movement as a politics that has been strongly grounded in the dynamics of everyday life . . ." (54). Here, within this understanding of "the reality of experience," of "the dynamics of everyday life," I find a place for identifying the kinds of texts I am seeking--texts that allow the social and economic relations that shape "experience" to be articulated. That articulation can be

present, by the way, in all kinds of texts--*including* purely lyrical, highly experimental, utterly *un*-realistic texts (the works of writers Christa Wolf and Janet Kauffman come to mind here, for example).

Spellmeyer writes that "Behind the politics of language, or rather, far beneath it, there waits another, long-neglected politics, long-neglected and poorly theorized--a deep politics of experience, 'deep' because it unfolds at the boundary between life-worlds in dialogue or contestation" (270). Addressing the works of writers, such as N. Scott Momaday and Simon J. Ortiz, who write from a position of colonial and post-colonial oppression, Spellmeyer posits the "life-worlds" of these writers against what he terms the "behind-their-backs tradition" of poststructuralist notions about the codes and laws of language and culture. Speaking of the work of Momaday, Spellmeyer writes:

> While he addresses us in our language, and on terms we can readily appreciate, he also writes as a person who has viewed this language from an outsider's perspective --has known firsthand its ability to silence those who give things other names. As much as his essay ['The Man Made of Words'] reaffirms our life-world and our language, it also takes aim against them. By reconstructing the traditions of his forebears in words partly ours and partly his, Momaday resists, and then presses back, the limitations of a culture which has endangered his own legacy. (269)

Here, in this "resisting and pressing back," in this articulation of a long-silenced "life-world," in this "deep politics of experience," I find a description of the kind of transformative texts--texts that "resist and press back," that "don't represent correctly," that "assert her right to a form that has never been used to tell her story"--the "good writing" that I hope to encourage.

And this brings me to the pedagogical theory of Madeleine Grumet, who, in *Bitter Milk*, introduces a concept she calls "bodyreading." Framed by Spellmeyer's discussion of the "deep politics" of the "life-world," this concept also gives a name to my textual preferences, as a writer and teacher whose goals are shaped by feminism and critical pedagogy. "Bodyreading," writes Grumet,

> is strung between the poles of our actual situation, crowded as it is with our own intentions, assumptions, and positions, and the possibilities that texts point to. Contemporary feminist theories of the text and programs of literary criticism such as poststructuralism or deconstruction have also pitted themselves against the idealism that imputes a meaning to the word, the sentence, the text, that is distinct from the actual and possible world of their readers. (130)

Necessary, but not sufficient, the "contemporay theories" Grumet points to bring us--as writers and readers, teachers and students--to an awareness of this tightrope, strung between the

two poles of our "actual situation" and the "possibilities that texts point to." It is from this pole, from this platform of our own "life-worlds," that we can step off, clear on where it is we're starting from and moving in the direction of something new.

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